Tells the Facts and Names the Names

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Travels in the Blathersphere

By Alexander Cockburn

Before me are press releases announcing the three-day formal agenda for the mid-June "Take Back America" conference staged in Washington D.C. by pwogwessive Democrats mustered in the "Campaign for America's Future". The Iraq war did not feature at all on the first two days, and slunk onto one of the last panels, on the last day. In other words, in an election year, the organizers decided to avoid almost entirely any scheduling of political discussion of a war to which about 70 per cent of all Americans are opposed, and which is topic A on every newscast and newspaper front page.

If you believe the account of Medea Benjamin's vigorously anti-war CodePink group, the "Take Back" organizers also double-crossed them on agreements to permit visible protests and questioning of Hilary Clinton on her pro-war position. Nor was there a spot for Jack Murtha on these schedules. The *Nation*, politically speaking a consort of "Campaign for America's Future", pledges to support only candidates promising speedy withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. On that guarantee, Nixon would have won the *Nation*'s endorsement in 1968. It would be more convincing if the *Nation* said now it won't endorse anyone who has continued to vote appropriations for the war.

The war grinds on, but the pwog-Democrats prefer to talk about other matters, such as the fact that Rove is not going to be indicted. Thank God. The left will have to talk about something else for a change. As a worthy hobbyhorse for the left, the whole Plame

(**Blathersphere** *continued on page 6*)

The Chinese Face of Neo-Liberalism

By PETER KWONG

During the recent visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao to Washington, the White House seemed bent on trying in every way possible to extend him a cool reception. The Chinese expected a state dinner, normally accorded to a head of state on the first official visit to the United States. Hu got a lunch instead. The White House announcer introduced Hu as the president of not the People's Republic but the Republic of China, which is Taiwan's official name. A known Falun Gong supporter was allowed onto the White House grounds to hackle Hu during his formal reception speech. Adding insult to injury, Vice President Cheney was caught snoozing during Hu's press conference.

But while Hu received a frosty reception in Washington, D.C., he was treated as a superstar in the state of Washington by the kings of the computer industry (Microsoft), the world's largest coffee shop chain (Starbucks), and America's preeminent aircraft maker (Boeing), who know better than anyone that China is doing everything right by the global capital. Bush might have begrudged Hu the honor of a state dinner, but Bill Gates regaled the Chinese president with a formal banquet at his $100 million lakeside mansion. Among the guests were executives from Costco, Weyerhaeuser, and Amazon.com – all eager to show the Chinese leader their appreciation for his efforts in providing American businesses with an ample supply of cheap labor, a stable currency exchange and an affable investment climate.

For China and its communist leaders to come this far it has been a long, hard road that started in 1978, when Deng Xiaoping took control of the country. Deng had been purged from the party leadership as "China's No. 2 Capitalist Roader" during the Cultural Revolution on account of his pro-private enterprise leanings, because he had advocated that the peasants be allowed private plots within the people's communes to earn extra income. After Mao's death, Deng kicked off his version of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" with the maxim that individual initiatives must be allowed to flourish in order to increase productivity. His most notable slogan of the time was to "let some get rich first, so others can get rich later", openly condoning the inequality that would result from his reform process. If this sounds like Ronald Reagan's neo-liberal "trickle down economics," it's because that's exactly what it is: both Ronald Reagan and Deng Xiaoping were great fans of the neo-liberal guru Milton Friedman.

In 1980, I was a visiting professor at the People's University in Beijing, which was at the time the elite party cadre training school. In October of that year, the chair of my Scientific Socialism Department informed me that I was given the unique honor, as a China-born foreign expert teaching social sciences, to attend a lecture at the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference that was to be given by the Nobel Laureate and America's best selling author of *Free to Choose,* Milton Friedman. When I arrived at the majestic conference hall, Friedman was already sitting at the dais, flanked by top Communist Party leaders and ministerial-level officials. His lecture focused on the inflationary crisis in the West, but his message to the Chinese was clear: inflation and slow growth are the results of intrusive government policies that hinder the functioning of a free market economy. To turn their economies around, countries had to cut taxes, shrink the size of the governments, and reduce labor costs. Friedman predicted that in November of that year his

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friend Ronald Reagan would be elected U.S. president and that he would enact policies according to that vision. He also prophesied that Ronald Reagan and Great Britain's Margaret Thatcher would lead the rest of the world into the promised land of growth and prosperity.

To me, Milton Friedman was a far-right neo-liberal economist who favored the opening of markets in developing countries by political means or military intervention, if necessary. It was his students from Chicago University that General Pinochet had invited to transform Chile's economy after he overthrew the legally elected president Allende with CIA help in 1973.

The "Chicago Boys" ordered a "shock treatment," which called for drastic reduction in the money supply and government spending. It also called for the privatization of state enterprises, abolished taxes on corporate profits, and welcomed foreign investment to exploit the country's natural resources. Under the gunpoint of the military junta, labor laws were suspended and political dissent was silenced. The "shock treatment" of the 1970s pushed Chile's unemployment rate to 22 per cent; real wages dropped by 40 per cent , and the country's industrial output fell by 12.9 per cent – making it Chile's worst depression since the 1930s.

But my Chinese hosts were not troubled by such facts. They wanted Friedman to show them how to jump-start their economy. It is intriguing how early the Chinese had searched out Friedman for guidance – only one year after Thatcher began her brutal "there is no other alternative" reforms.

China started its economic reforms by abolishing the people's communes. Suddenly, without the collectives, the peasants had to privately purchase seed, fertilizer and water rights, and to pay higher taxes to support a large cadre of local party officials. But the prices of farm products were kept low, forcing many to work as migrant workers in the cities. Others followed when their land was seized for urban and industrial development. Once in the cities, they were given neither residential status nor legal rights and protection, but they were nevertheless expected to be gainfully employed. Otherwise, under the "custody and repatriation" laws, beggars, vagrants and those with no employment were repatriated back to their villages, held at detention centers, or even used as forced labor. The Chinese version of the English "enclosure" process created approximately 150 million impoverished migrants who had to sell their labor cheaply in order to survive. Meanwhile, state enterprises were slowly privatized. Their employees no longer enjoyed the guarantee of "the iron rice bowl" and had to find jobs on the open labor market. The masses of rural migrants, joined by growing numbers of laid-off state enterprise workers, provided China with an endless supply of cheap labor.

Through all this, China's neo-liberal communist bureaucrats have been more interested in protecting employers than in enforcing labor laws. This is evidenced by persistent labor and safety violations that lead to spectacular gas explosions, mine cave-ins, and flooding that kill thousands of people every year. In 2003, for instance, there were 136,340 reported deaths from industrial accidents. But while China accounted for 80 per cent of the world's total coal mining-related deaths that year, it produced only 35 per cent of the world's coal. At the same time, nearly half of China's migrant workers were forced to work while their wages were held back – to the tune of roughly $12 billion collectively owed in back pay. Yet in China it is illegal to organize independent unions or strike. Labor leaders are regularly jailed and prosecuted as criminals; their families are harassed.

The secret of China's economic miracle is its browbeaten working class. The picture of China's Gilded Age of inequality is not pretty. On the average, the yearly income of a Chinese peasant in 2003 was $317. The monthly wages of factory workers ranged between $62 and $100 – only marginally higher than in 1993, even as China's economy grew by almost 10 per cent annually during the same period. On the other side of the social spectrum is the increasingly wealthy urban middle class that is emerging on the coattails of the coterie of the super-rich. In 2006 Shanghai held a "millionaire fair," featuring displays of luxury sedans, yachts, a piece of jewelry priced at $25 million, and a diamond-studded dog leash valued at $61,000.

To be sure, the wealth that can afford such luxuries was not created by enterprising efforts of individuals with unique abilities or skills. According to a report by the China Rights Forum, only 5 per cent of China's 20,000 richest people have made it on merit. More than 90 per cent are related to senior government or Communist Party officials. The richest among them are the relatives of the very top officials who had used their position to pass the laws that have transformed state-owned industries into stock holding companies, and then appointed family members as managers. In this way the children of top party officials – China's new "princelings" – took over China's most strategic and profitable industries: banking, transportation, power generation, natural resources, media, and weapons. Once in management positions, they get loans from government-controlled banks, acquire foreign partners, and list their companies on Hong Kong or New York stock exchanges to raise more capital. Each step of the way the princelings enrich themselves –not only as major shareholders of the companies, but also from the kickbacks they get by awarding contracts to foreign firms. To call this "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is a joke. Even capitalism is not the appropriate term. A Chinese sociologist has defined it as "high-tech feudalism with Chinese characteristics."

As Confucius observed long time ago, when top officials are crooked, local level cadres are bound to follow suit, and rampant unchecked corruption ensues. Peasants complain that local officials seize their farmland with minimal compensation and then sell it off at high prices to developers who build high-rise apartments, factories and shopping malls. Workers complain of layoffs without pensions, abuse on the job, and work with no pay. The enormity of environmental degradation due to official indifference is only surfacing now. The Chinese public is

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not indifferent; demonstrations of discontent are on the rise. In 2004, the Public Security Bureau reported that the number of "mass incidents" had risen to 74,000. In 2005, the number jumped another 13 percent. "A protest begins in China every five minutes. If the protests run longer than five minutes, then there are two going on at the same time," observed David Zweig, an expert on Chinese politics at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

As the number of protests increases, so does the intensity of violence used to suppress them. The worst occurred last December, when a special paramilitary unit of the national police force shot and killed as many as 20 protesters in the Guangdong village of Dongzhou. This is the largest known killing of unarmed civilians in China since 1989, and has been dubbed as the "Mini-Tiananmen Massacre." The protest began over the forced eviction of villagers from their land to make room for the construction of a foreign-financed wind power plant. When the villagers rejected the official offer of $3 per family in compensation, which one resident described as "not enough to buy toilet paper to wipe one's ass," they were brought face-to-face with paramilitary policemen carrying AK-47 assault rifles and flanked with tanks. According to the *New York Times*, the police started firing tear gas into 1,000 demonstrators around 7 p.m. When that failed to scare the people, "at about 8 p.m. they started using guns, shooting bullets into the ground, but not really targeting anybody. Finally, at about 10 p.m. they started killing people." Vicious repressions similar to this have been reported all across the country.

Almost every country in Latin America, with the exception of Cuba, implemented neo-liberal policies lauded as the solution to poverty and stagnation for decades. Instead, as governments lost their sovereignty to the multi-nationals, U.S. banks and IMF, these policies only brought more poverty and misery. The resulting mass protests and the weakening of military regimes eventually opened up a political space for voters to express their views. In country after county, voters have been choosing to elect leftist candidates to lead them out of the neo-liberal trap.

Unfortunately, there is no such option in China. The one-party system allows for no opposition candidates for Chinese voters to choose from. Instead, Hu Jingtao came into office in 2002 with the specific task of introducing a kinder and gentler policy to cool off public resentment. He and Premier Wen Jiabao promised to crack down on corruption and introduce welfare programs to provide relief to the rural poor. But these reforms can only go so far without threatening the privileges of the officials and undermining the very attraction China has to foreign investors. And, above all, the mandate of Hu is to maintain the political monopoly of the Chinese Communist Party, which, after all, did not order the June 4 Massacre in 1989 to let its power slip away. The party's greatest fear is that political relaxation would lead to a "colored revolution" of the type that has beleaguered so many ex-Soviet states – from Georgia and Ukraine, to Kyrgyzstan. Hu is very clear on that score, blaming the collapse of the Soviet Union on former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev. "When managing ideology, we have to learn from Cuba and North Korea. Although North Korea has encountered temporary economic problems, its policies are consistently correct", he has been heard to say. In the last few years under Hu, according to Robin Munro of China Labour Bulletin, "if anything, the numbers of arrests of dissidents, labor and rural rights activists and Internet free thinkers has been even higher … than during Jiang Zemin's last years in office."

It is intriguing how early the Chinese had searched out Milton Friedman for guidance – only one year after Thatcher began her brutal "there is no other alternative" reforms.

The party now does everything possible to preclude a "peaceful evolution. Rather than having to contend with opposition politics, " It has preferred to toss aside Marxist tenets and incorporate capitalists into its ranks (as the new constitution allows). Chinese communist leaders are so obsessed iwith maintaining their rule that they are combing through Chinese dynastic histories for models. A few years ago the state-run CCTV aired a 44-part blockbuster docudrama on the life of Emperor Yongzheng in the Qing dynasty, which depicted him as a ruthless ruler who worked hard to improve the lives of his people, and who in the process rejuvenated the dynasty to last several generations after his death. The then President Jiang Zemin was believed to be trying to fashion himself as a modern Yongzheng.

Self-serving as they are, however, China's Communist rulers also serve the interests of global capital. Foreign-financed companies, according to the latest Chinese customs data, control about 60 per cent of China's exports. Most of the profits go to foreign investors. Dong Tao, an economist in Hong Kong, estimates that while "a Barbie doll costs $20, China only gets about 35 cents of that." Yasheng Huang of the Sloan School of Management at MIT agrees. "[W]hile China gets the wage benefits of globalization, it does not get to keep the profits of globalization." The situation has generated a domestic chorus of complaints accusing the government of selling off Chinese banks and enterprises to foreigners and overseas Chinese investors to the detriment of homegrown competitors. During the last session of the National People's Congress, some delegates were brave enough to challenge the party's attempt to legalize the right to private property on the grounds that it ran counter to the founding principles of the People's Republic of China.

Come to think of it, China and the U.S.A. are two sides of the same coin – both disfigured by their respective neo-liberal policies. If China's face doesn't look pretty, neither does America's. After 25 years of the neo-liberal order, chief executives of America's largest companies, who once made 69 times more than their average employees, now make 431 times as much. After years of cuts in government spending, U.S. infant mortality rate is ranked 31st out of 32 industrialized countries – just slightly better than Latvia's. When our democratic government is willing to offer billion dollar taxcuts to the rich but has no money to purchase body armor for its irregular troops in Iraq, isn't it about time for the average, underpaid and underserved Americans to wake up and join forces with the increasingly global movement against the neo-liberal global agenda?

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The Ominous Shadow of 1988 Hovers Over Mexico's Presidential Elections

By John Ross

Driving in from the airport I asked the cab driver whether it was true, as reported in the US press, that airport taxi drivers were being pressured not to vote for leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, often called AMLO, in the July 2 presidential election. Was this true?

"On our site, they threatened two drivers if they don't vote for Calderon (Felipe Calderon, the rightwing PAN candidate) but no one is going for it," corroborated Hector S., a 36-year-old National University business grad who is forced to push a hack for a living, "How can they do that? Isn't the ballot supposed to be secret?" the driver asked his passenger but didn't wait for an answer. "To me, it's a lot like 1988 when they stole the election from Cardenas. Like I said, we're not going for it this time." Hector had been an 18-year-old student about to enter the university in 1988 and had joined the protests that followed the Great Fraud with his older brothers.

As the taxi glided to a stop at the light on the wide slum avenue, a ragged youth threw himself gracelessly on the cab's hood and started soaping the windshield. Hector waved him off sadly and dropped a coin in his cupped hand. "How can a country so rich have so many poor people?" The cabbie answered himself again. "This is two countries, amigo. One up there for Calderon" – he pointed to a bank of skyscrapers in the distance – "and the rest of us down here with Lopez Obrador."

The July 2 Mexican presidential election is the most pertinent one since the watershed year of 1988. That's when Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, the son of Lazaro Cardenas, the nation's last leftist president (1932-38) squared off against a Harvard-trained neo-liberal technocrat named Carlos Salinas. The contest pitted the Washington Consensus against the revolutionary nationalism of the Mexican left in an election that would decide the future of Mexico, at least up until now.

As it turned out, Salinas and the then-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) the longest ruling political dynasty in the known universe at the time, stole the election, and NAFTA was next on the agenda. On July 2, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador intends to change all that, but in Mexico history is a closed loop, the same boneheaded mistakes and miscalculations are made over and over again, and what happened back then is apt to repeat itself now.

July 2 will be my fifth Mexican presidential election but none has ever equaled the high drama of 1988 when the PRI, blindsided by the arrogance of power, failed to see Cardenas coming and had to steal ballot boxes and burn their contents, falsify tally sheets and crash vote-tabulating computers. On election night July 6, electoral officials lied to reporters that the system had collapsed and it didn't come back up for ten days when the free market champ Salinas was declared the winner by 51 per cent of the popular vote. Thousands of voting stations were never included in the final results. No one believed them anyway. Whenever I jumped into a cab in those tremulous days, the driver would laugh and tell me how the people had "chingared" (screwed over) the PRI. The post-electoral period was a bloody one. Cardenas's people went into the streets, and Cuauhtemoc tried to control them. Mexico bordered on nervous breakdown.

"The Poor First!" has been Obrador's campaign cry from Day One: rich vs. poor, white vs. brown, the bottom vs. the top.

The Great Fraud of '88 was confected by a compromised electoral "authority." Cardenas was subjected to lacerating media attack . Cuauhtemoc's people were set upon by the PRI government; his aide-de-camp assassinated on election eve. But the PRI's malfeasance was met with a groundswell from the bottom. The people the color of the earth, as Subcomandante Marcos calls them, rose up against the only party they had ever known and demanded economic and political democracy and that ballot boxes be reopened and all the votes recounted. More than 500 members of Cardenas's fledgling Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) were killed in political violence between 1988 and 1991. In 1991, the PRI and the now-ruling PAN voted to destroy the evidence and burnt the ballots.

For many veterans of that tumultuous time, the shadow of 1988 casts itself ominously over July 2. For one thing, the maximum electoral authority, the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), which grew out of the debacle of 1988 and which comported itself with admirable equanimity in 2000 when the long-ruling PRI was deposed from power by Vicente Fox, seems once again to be a creature of ruling party interests; only this time around, the ruling party is the PAN. Time and again in the run-up to July 2 , the IFE and its gray-faced president Luis Carlos Ugalde have come down hard on AMLO, while condoning Calderon's dirty tricks.

The IFE allows the PAN to run a blizzard of venomous hit pieces for months attacking Lopez Obrador as a DANGER to Mexico – the big red letters are stamped across the screen – before finally pulling the plug under court order.

"All that seems to be missing is that the system collapses," Luis Cota, a veteran of '88, sourly chuckles when the two of us bump into each other on the night of the Great Debate on June 6 in the cavernous Zocalo plaza where the PRD would show the face-off on the big screen to tens of thousands of militants, almost all of them, as always, the color of the earth.

For months, the hit pieces have flickered across the tube, sometimes four to a commercial break. Lopez Obrador's pugnacious mug intercut with such boogiemen as Hugo Chavez and Subcomandante Marcos, the police riot at Atenco, a brutal lynching in the city's southern suburbs, the city itself collapsing into dust. Lopez Obrador is a PELIGRO for Mexico!

Inciting the "voto del miedo" – the

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Vote of Fear – ran up big numbers for Ernesto Zedillo in 1994 after the Zapatistas had risen in Chiapas and Salinas's handpicked successor Luis Donaldo Colosio was gunned down in Tijuana The message hasn't been lost on Calderon's handlers who have invested millions of Yanqui dollars in the TV onslaught.

The "presidenciales" mean big bucks for Mexico's two-headed television monopoly, Televisa and its junior partner TV Azteca, about $1.3 billion in primetime spots by the time it's all done. From the campaign get-go on January 19, when it broadcast Calderon's kick-off live, Televisa has tilted to the PANista and attacked Lopez Obrador, sometimes showing AMLO in jerky frames with lots of spooky music to accentuate the DANGER. Back in '88, Televisa and its star anchor Jacobo Zabludowsky, then staunch PRIistas, gave Cardenas the same treatment.

One reason for the bias in 2006: Fox and the PAN put on a full court press in the Senate this April to pass what is called here "the Law of Televisa" that lets 40-year concessions for the entire electro-magnetic spectrum to the two TV titans.

As an interventionist president, Fox's brash grandstanding for a Calderon presidency (the code words are "economic continuity") is unparalleled in the annals of Mexican presidential campaigns. Although both the PRD and the PRI have gone to court to force Fox to cease and desist, the nation's attorney general (Fox's appointee) claims no jurisdiction to start an investigation. Ugalde's response is limited to feeble hand wringing.

The PAN-PRI putsch to beat back Lopez Obrador, who led the presidential pack by as much as 18 points for 30 months before sliding under Calderon hit pieces, reached fever pitch in 2005 when Fox and the unctuous PRI standard-bearer Roberto Madrazo joined forces to try and bar Lopez Obrador from the ballot (the "desafuero") – and even to imprison him for the heinous crime of trying to build an access road to a hospital. (He was enjoined by court order.) But AMLO turned this legal lynching on its head by mobilizing 1.2 million citizens for a silent march through the city he then governed as mayor last April 24, the largest political demonstration in the history of this republic.

Before there was the "desafuero", the PAN and the PRI had tried to hang Lopez Obrador with a series of videotapes secretly shot by a crooked construction tycoon pissed off at AMLO for denying him city contracts. On the tapes, Carlos Ahumada appears to be bribing PRD officials but the "bribes" were legal tender for a party election. The videos, aired over and over again on Televisa and TV Azteca throughout 2004, never touched Lopez Obrador and, in fact, strengthened his lead for the presidency.

Despite the deluge of fear and loathing – the Ahumada shooting, the police riot at San Salvador Atenco, the murder of two striking steelworkers in Michoacan, all designed to induce the "voto de miedo" – Lopez Obrador went into the June 6 debate neck and neck with Calderon, 35-35 in most newspaper polls. But polling is not a serious business in Mexico; (most of the capital's 20 newspapers are controlled by parochial political interests, and the parties pay to have their own polls published as the *Gospel Truth* .

Like all staged political spectaculars, the debate proved to be really a string of set pieces with some heavy sniping between Calderon and Lopez Obrador over who was the bigger liar. The PANista tried to look authoritative but looked more authoritarian, "tough on crime" with the "mano dura" ('hard hand'), robotically thrusting his index finger at the camera, frenetically fending off AMLO's insinuations that he was the candidate of the rich.

AMLO, on the other hand, is the candidate of the poor – "The Poor First!" has been his (campaign cry from day one. That's what this campaign has always been about: rich vs. poor, white vs. brown, the bottom vs. the top. Lopez Obrador is sworn to do something about the yawning divide that puts 70 million Mexicans under and around the poverty line while an infinitesimal clique of fat cats swill champagne from silver goblets.

AMLO's detractors, most prominently the Zapatista leader, Subcomandante Marcos, tend to scoff. After all, Lopez Obrador's moneybags, at least at the beginning of his wildly popular reign as Mexico City mayor, was multi-billionaire Carlos Slim, the third richest man in the world.

Lopez Obrador won the Great Debate hands down, although the pundits were reluctant to concede it. Given that there are a lot more poor Mexicans than Calderon's fat cats, Obrador should bring home the bacon on July 2 if he is not assassinated a la Colosio '94 before that date or cheated out of victory like Cardenas in '88.

There is generalized conviction among the pundits that the presidential election will be very close, decided by 100,000 or less votes out of a probable 42 million (53 per cent of the electorate), to be cast July 2 . If the IFE awards Calderon victory, AMLO's supporters – with or without Obrador (a gifted street protest leader) will hold what before NAFTA "modernized" Mexico's electoral process used to be called "the second election in the street."

Back in 1988, the anger of the "jodidos" (the underclass) was palpable and got away from Cardenas. The National Palace was firebombed, highways were blockaded, government offices invaded. PRIistas death squads stalked the city, and Salinas sent in the military. I went to a lot of funerals. Francisco Xavier Ovando and Ramon Gil, close collaborators of Cuauhtemoc , were gunned down just a few blocks from the Zocalo.

"Ovando and Gil, " I sighed. We stood on the edge of the great plaza as the debate was about to begin and eyed the dark thunderheads pushing up from the south of the city with suspicion. "Ovando and Gil," Luis sighed back. "Ojala companero that it doesn't happen again." CP

John Ross is in Mexico City waiting to see how it all turns out so that he can write the epilogue to "Making Another World Possible – Zapatista Chronicles 2000-2006", to be published in October by Nation Books.

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(**Blathersphere** *continued from page 1)*
scandal has never made any sense. What was it all about in the first analysis? Outing a CIA employee. What's wrong with that? Many years ago a man came into the office of the *New Left Review* in London, where I was manning the portcullis at the time, and said his name was Philip Agee and he wanted to write a book about the CIA. Did we call for a special prosecutor to have this fellow hauled over the coals? No, we did not.

Rove has swollen in the left's imagination like a descendant of Pere Ubu, Jarry's surreal monster. There was no scheme so deviously diabolical but the hand of Rove could not be detected at work. Actually the man has always been of middling competence. He makes Clinton's political consigliere, Dick Morris, look like Cardinal Richelieu. Since 9/11 where has been the good news for the Administration? It's been a sequence of catastrophes of unexampled protraction. Under Rove's fatal guidance, George Bush has been maneuvered into one catastrophe after another. Count the tombstones: "Bring it on", "Mission Accomplished", the proposed sale of U.S. port management to Arabs . It was Rove who single-handedly rescued the antiwar movement last July by advising Bush not to give Cindy Sheehan fifteen minutes of face time at his ranch.

And when Rove's disastrous hand is wrenched from the steering wheel it is seized by another bugaboo of the left, in the form of Dick Cheney. It was the imbecilic vice president who gave Jack Murtha traction last October when the Democrats were cold shouldering him for calling for instant withdrawal from Iraq. In his wisdom, the draft-dodging Cheney insulted the bemedaled former marine drill instructor as a clone of Michael Moore, and had to apologize three days later.

Rove and Cheney, the White House's answer to Bouvard and Pecuchet, are counselors who have driven George Bush into the lowest ratings of any American president. Yet the left remains obsessed with their evil powers. Is there any better testimony to the vacuity and impotence of the endlessly touted "blogosphere" which in mid-June had twin gatherings in the form of the Yearly Kos convention in Las Vegas and the above-mentioned "Take America Back" folkmoot of "progressive" Democrats in Washington, D.C.

In political terms the blogosphere is like white noise, insistent and meaningless, like the wash of Pacific surf I can hear most days. But MoveOn.org and Daily Kos have been hailed as the emergent forms of modern politics, the target of excited articles in the *New York Review of Books*.

Beyond raising money swiftly handed over to the gratified veterans of the election industry, both MoveOn and Daily Kos have had zero political effect, except as a demobilizing force. The effect on writers is horrifying. Talented people feel they have to produce 400 words of commentary every day, and you can see the lethal consequences on their minds and style, both of which turn rapidly to slush. They glance at the *New York Times* and rush to their laptops to rewrite what they just read. Hawsers to reality soon fray, and they float off, drifting zeppelins of inanity.

At the Kos convention, as hilariously described in three reports by Michael J. Smith on our CounterPunch website, the ugly matter of the war in Iraq was scarcely raised, as the Kosniks reserved the surge of their passion for… Joe Wilson, husband of Valerie Plame.

Meanwhile, there are lines around the block for Al Gore's movie about global warming. Can we "take back" the weather? Of course not, unless by pharmaceutical means. The FDA has given final approval to GlaxoSmithKline to launch Wellbutrin XL, to combat "Seasonal Affective Disorder". Is there any good political news? Yes, Jack Murtha still says he will challenge Steny Hoyer for the post of Democratic leader, for the 2007/8 Congress, if the Democrats recapture the House. This would be an encouraging prospect. But this is the party that couldn't pick up Duke Cunningham's seat in southern California, after the Dukester donned his prison overalls. CP

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